

1808

HINDSIGHT

The Day the Fish Turned Foul Part I

By Jody Morgan

December 22, 1807, was a dismal day for Duxbury residents. Effective immediately, American ships were forbidden to depart for foreign ports. Ships then at sea could remain at sea, but once they returned home they were likewise subject to the Embargo Act. Fishing was permitted, but the lucrative trade with Europe and the West Indies in dried and salted fish came to an abrupt halt.

Months passed. The Embargo Act had no time limit. As long as France and England refused to recognize the rights of American citizens to engage in trade as neutral merchants, the ban remained in effect. Salem took the issue to court, claiming the act was unconstitutional, but the judge disagreed.

Although Duxbury had once depended primarily on agriculture to feed its families, many of the inhabitants were no longer interested in subsistence farming as a way of life. Seth Sprague's story, as recorded in the "Memorial of the Sprague Family," typifies the shift in occupation made by Duxbury residents after the Revolution: "In the year 1790, having a large and increasing family to provide for, and perceiving that the income from his farm, however industriously tilled, would be hardly sufficient to keep him from poverty, he resolved, as a probable means of advancing his fortune, to engage in trade." Profit from trade allowed Sprague to buy a small fishing schooner, which in four years' time netted enough money for him to become a shipbuilder and owner of a small merchant fleet.

But as soon as the Embargo Act became law, the shipyards shut down. Some 30,000 American seamen were suddenly out of work. A few ship's carpenters found employment constructing houses for the lucky merchants and mariners who were not yet on the verge of bankruptcy (both the King Caesar House and the Gershom Bradford House were built in 1808), but the

hitherto depended on Commerce, Navigation & the Fisheries, & the numerous arts subservient thereto for a subsistence; that the soil, of this Township is sterile, & insufficient for the production of necessaries competent for the support of the people who inhabit it; — & that if they be much longer prohibited from following their customary avocations on the Ocean, a large portion of them must migrate or starve.

British navy out of commission with food poisoning. The catch from 1807 apparently still remained unsold, leaving "a large quantity of fish, which the owners diligently labour among, anxiously watch over and by unwearied exertion endeavor to preserve; — but they are beginning to perish...."

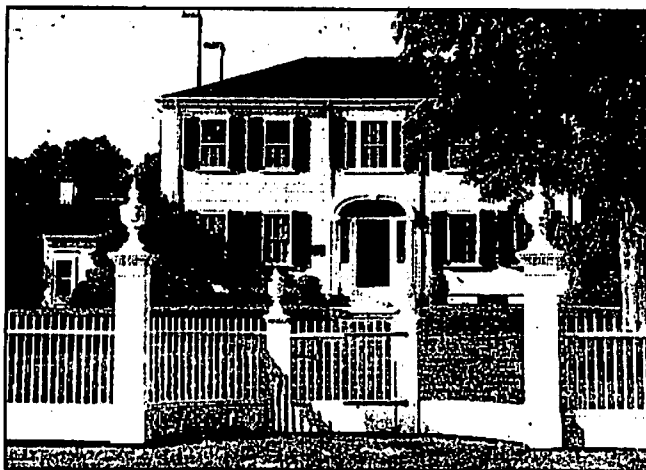
Although the letter loses some of its impact in belaboring the point that turning

from seafaring to manufacturing would be impossible for the inhabitants of what had once been an almost completely self-sufficient community, it succinctly expresses the failure of the Embargo Act to effect the warring European powers:

Altho the Legislators of the Union, when they prohibited their constituents from pursuing their customary and laudable employment on the Ocean, might have been activated by principles of patriotism, & influenced by a desire of promoting the happiness, welfare, and dignity of

their Country, yet the event has shown that a permanent embargo in the United States while it is scarcely felt or noticed in Europe, operates to the injury & ruin of ourselves.

While entreating Jefferson to end the embargo immediately if that lay within his power, or to convene congress at once to do so, the Duxbury petition highlights the threat "that our Seamen and our Merchants, hitherto so exemplary in their conduct will acquire habits of evading the laws and defrauding the revenue of our Country." For at least one of the authors of the Duxbury petition, whose fish was indeed turning foul, this was not an idle speculation.



Building houses, including the 1808 King Caesar House, offered work to some of the craftsmen idled by the Embargo Act.

majority were unemployed. And on the wharves, barrels of mackerel and boxes of salt cod began to rot.

The waste of an entire year's labor and the loss of investment as well as profit could no longer be endured in silence. The Duxbury Town Meeting of September 5, 1808, chose a five-member committee to draft a petition to President Thomas Jefferson requesting the immediate repeal of the odious embargo. Samuel A. Frazar, George Partridge, Major Judah Alden, John Winslow and Samuel Walker drafted the letter that bears the same day's date. Their entreaty outlines the town's desperate position, asserting:

That your petitioners have

Now even as late as 1837, farming remained the principal occupation listed by 200 of Duxbury's 440 household heads, so at least in the description of the soil as "sterile," the authors resorted to a bit of hyperbole to make their point. The plight of the town's fishermen was underscored by a similar rhetorical device as the committee protested that they "with the greatest exertion, and under the most prosperous aspect of our affairs, could but barely support their families."

But the state of the on-hand stock of fish probably needed no exaggeration. Indeed, if the town had been allowed to export it to the proper places, they could possibly have put the entire